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FROM FIELD AND STUDY

The Probable Breeding of the Aleutian Tern in Southeastern Alaska—a Query.—

A record in the May, 1920, number of THE CONDOR (page 111) of the probable breeding of the Aleutian Tern near Yakutat appears to rest on "sight" identification only, and the actions of Mr. Walker's birds were so different from the usual habits of this species that I am forced to doubt if the birds seen really were Aleutian Terns.

Sterna aleutica has always been a decidedly rare bird, and authentic eggs have been taken in North America at three places only. A single egg was taken by Bischoff on Kadiak Island in 1868 together with the parent which is the type of the species; but since that date it has not been found breeding in southeastern Alaska, and the supposition that it bred in the Aleutian Islands (which was responsible for the bird's name) has not been substantiated by any of the ornithologists who have visited the chain. Mr. E. W. Nelson was the next ornithologist to take eggs. During his stay at St. Michael from 1877 to 1881 he found two breeding colonies. One was on an island in St. Michael Bay and the other on a small island near the village of Kegikhtowik about eighteen miles away. Nearly all the islands in this region are rocky and rise abruptly from the sea or else are low and marshy. The two islands where these terns breed are of a different character, rising from the sea in a sharp incline for some 25 or 30 feet and being level on top, or fairly so, with a covering of dry matted grass and moss. Apparently these birds require this type of nesting ground.

No one seems to have found the Aleutian Tern breeding in North America since Mr. Nelson's records were published until 1915 when the present writer visited St. Michael and collected eggs on the island in St. Michael Bay.

There are a number of supposed eggs of this species in American collections taken by a whaling captain on Stuart Island. These eggs I believe are eggs of the Arctic Tern; at least all that I have seen show none of the characteristics that render the eggs of the Aleutian Tern distinguishable at a glance from those of *Sterna paradisaea*.

There are certain ways in which the Aleutian Tern can be identified in life with certainty. The best field mark I consider to be its voice. The usual note is a three syllabled whistle suggesting one of the small sandpipers (*Ereunetes*) and not in the least tern-like. I heard the harsh grating note that other terns use, but once, and that was from a wounded bird. The second distinguishing characteristic is its habitual shyness. Even when a person is walking over its nesting ground the birds usually keep out of gun range and it is rare for them to dart down at one's head. I never had an Aleutian Tern strike my head although this is a common habit with the Arctic Tern. Even a wounded bird on the ground, which will usually attract other species of terns, only serves to draw this shy bird a little nearer. It took me a number of visits of several hours each to collect a small series of these birds, while the same number of Arctic or Common Terns could be taken in any colony in a few minutes. *Aleutica* can be distinguished from *paradisaea* by its flight, but this distinction is less noticeable except upon direct comparison between the two species. *Aleutica* has slower wing beats and there is a certain lack of directness about its flight that once learned is diagnostic. In general appearance the Aleutian Tern seems larger and darker colored than the Arctic, but these impressions are often lost in poor light. The white forehead and black feet and bill, so noticeable in the bird in the hand, can be seen in life under exceptional light conditions only.

There is one way in which the Arctic Tern might be confused with the Aleutian Tern by a person who was not familiar with the latter species. In a certain stage of plumage, summer specimens of *paradisaea* show considerable white on the forehead. This plumage was described many years ago under the name *Sterna portlandica* and probably represents birds one year old that, because of deficient vitality, or from some other cause, have failed to acquire the full nuptial plumage at the spring molt. This plumage is somewhat rare and many colonies show no birds in this stage, but I have seen others which contained a considerable number of these, so-called Portland Terns. I believe it is not definitely known if birds in this plumage breed; but such birds in a colony might act as described by Mr. Walker and their markings lead to the impression

that they were Aleutian Terns. I have even known of several of them having been collected for this species and their identity not discovered until some time later.

In view of the above facts it seems as if the probable breeding of the Aleutian Tern in southeastern Alaska is open to doubt unless specimens of the birds were actually taken.—F. SEYMOUR HERSEY, *Taunton, Massachusetts, August 14, 1920.*

Comments upon the Safety of Sea Birds and upon the "Probable" Occurrence of the Northern Bald Eagle in California.—In THE CONDOR for May-June, 1920, appear two articles upon which the undersigned seeks the privilege of commenting.

The article by J. Grinnell on page 101, entitled "The Existence of Sea Birds a Relatively Safe One," appears to the writer, after a number of years careful study of this very question, to be most timely and accurate and not open to any criticism whatever. The only reason for taking up the matter here is a desire to enlarge somewhat on the theme of the original article.

We are all familiar with the frequent allusions to the "sea birds killed by storms" that have appeared in print in times past. A number of years ago the writer began to visit the California beaches after severe storms, expecting to find dead and crippled sea birds plentiful. This was not found to be the case, however, and, after several years observation along the beaches and the examination of hundreds of dead birds, the conclusion was arrived at that the storms have nothing whatever to do with the birds found dead along shore. In fact the greatest numbers of dead birds were noted at times when there had been no storms for weeks. Another point to be considered is that birds killed or crippled by storms blowing on-shore would still be fat when they reached the beach. On the contrary, a great percentage of the shearwaters, fulmars and other birds found dead along our beaches are in a more or less emaciated condition, evidence that they died of disease. Furthermore, in many cases their internal organs were swarming with parasites. It is the writer's belief that sea birds, particularly those that migrate in companies, are at times subject to epidemics to which large numbers succumb and that this fact is responsible for the numbers of dead birds on the beaches at certain times, storms having nothing whatever to do with it.

The most striking example known to the writer of the ability of sea birds to withstand severe weather conditions is that of the young of the Ancient Murrelet (*Synthliboramphus antiquus*). At midnight, with the aid of the light of a lantern, the writer has watched these downy chicks, not more than three or four days old, dive through the surf in response to the cry of the parent bird and head out to sea into the teeth of a southeasterly gale, and this at a time when boulders weighing a hundred pounds or more were being rolled up and down the beach like so many pebbles. Furthermore, all evidence points to the fact that these young birds remain on the open sea many miles from land until fully grown, in spite of the fact that in this latitude severe gales are frequent through the summer months. In eight seasons spent in this region the writer has never seen a young murrelet anywhere near the shore after it had once taken to the water. In fact, the half-grown young had never been noted at all until this season (1920), when, on July 21, A. M. Bailey and the writer secured a pair of adult birds and a pair of young about two-thirds grown in the middle of the channel between Forrester and Dall islands, ten or twelve miles off-shore.

The second article upon which the writer desires to comment is the one by Mr. J. H. Fleming, entitled "The Northern Bald Eagle as a Probable Californian Bird" (page 110). Now, with all due regard to the high ornithological standing of the author of this note, it seems to the writer that the evidence submitted is far too inconclusive to serve as a basis for recording the Northern Bald Eagle as a "probable" Californian bird.

Let us consider briefly the evidence as presented. In the beginning of the article Mr. Fleming states that the Northern Bald Eagle "should occur at least as a migrant". This statement is made arbitrarily without presentation of any facts tending to show that the Northern Bald Eagle in the southwestern portion of its range is to any extent migratory. The writer, whose experience with this bird in southeastern Alaska covers a period of eight years, finds that it is, in the extreme southeastern part of Alaska at least, resident throughout the year, being fully as abundant in winter as in summer. Near Craig, Prince of Wales Island, during the winter of 1919-20, several pairs of birds

were noted that remained in the vicinity of their nests throughout the entire winter, eggs being laid in April.

As to the difference of a few millimeters in wing length: How much value should be attached to this feature in considering an individual of a race known to show such a vast amount of variation in size, individually? The writer has measured several extra small adult birds killed in southeastern Alaska that, if considered from point of size alone, would necessarily have to be referred to the southern form. It is improbable that any CONDOR reader would consider even momentarily the recording of the southern bird from Alaska on this evidence; so, would not the old saying "It's a poor rule that won't work both ways" pertain to this case?

The fact is that there is no hard and fast line of demarcation between the two forms of the Bald Eagle. The size difference is only an *average* difference. The northern form *averages* larger than the southern form, and individual variants may be found within the known range of either form that, if considered from a standpoint of size alone, could be referred to the other subspecies.

In view of these facts it seems to the writer that the preponderance of evidence points to the fact that Mr. Fleming's Lakeport bird is an unusually large individual of the Southern Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus leucocephalus*) and may not be properly considered as demonstrating even the "probable" occurrence of the northern form in California.—G. WILLETT, *Forrester Island, Alaska, August 5, 1920.*

Eastern Fox Sparrow at Seattle.—On February 15, 1920, at Renton, a small town a few miles southeast of Seattle, Washington, a typical Eastern Fox Sparrow (*Passerella iliaca iliaca*) was secured as it fed in a thicket bordering an open field with a miscellaneous gathering of Rusty Song Sparrows and Oregon Towhees. Even before it was shot its dissimilarity to the several subspecies of Fox Sparrows that occur here was easily noticeable, and once in the hand there was no question as to its identity. This is as far as I know, the first record for this species for the state of Washington. The specimen itself is now in the collection of Mr. D. E. Brown, of Seattle.—THOS. D. BURLEIGH, *Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, September 6, 1920.*

The Yellow-headed Blackbird Flocking with Brewer Blackbirds.—While passing through Lake Valley on August 12, 1920, about two miles north of Meyers, El Dorado County, a flock of about seventy-five Brewer Blackbirds (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*) flushed from the road and flew to a lodgepole pine tree in the adjoining field about a hundred yards distant. In their midst was a single Yellow-headed Blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) showing in striking contrast. I took the bird, which proved to be a young male.

The Yellow-headed Blackbird is frequently associated with Red-winged Blackbirds, and Coues (Birds of the Northwest, 1874, p. 190) mentions them flocking with Cowbirds, but its presence with Brewer Blackbirds seems rather unusual, and all the more strange as there were no Redwings seen in the vicinity.—FRANK N. BASSETT, *Alameda, California, August 27, 1920.*

Note on the Nesting Habits of the Osprey in Yellowstone Park.—On the spires of rock which stand up perpendicularly from the steep sides of the Canyon of the Yellowstone River in the Yellowstone National Park are a large number of nests of the Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus carolinensis*). All nests observed from the side of the canyon were without any shelter or protection of any kind. They were great collections of sticks resting on the rock, and apparently a new nest was built on top of the nest of the preceding year or years. At the time of our visit to the Yellowstone, in July, 1920, a young bird was observed flopping about in one nest, and an adult bird was standing on the side of the nest with the back to the sun so as to project its shadow directly into the nest. We watched this nest for fully an hour and during all that time the adult bird's shadow was thrown into the center of the nest. The parent bird was clearly keeping the young in the shade. During all the time of the observation the sun was shining brightly and the weather was warm.—CLAUDE GIGNOUX, *Berkeley, California, September 8, 1920.*

Some Nesting Habits of the Pied-billed Grebe.—There seems to be some uncertainty among authorities as to the sitting habits of the Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*). I was fortunate enough, on June 9, 1920, to surprise one of these birds on its nest in such a way as to prove, to my own satisfaction at least, that it was incubating its eggs in normal fashion.

I was driving along the county road from Firebaugh to Merced, California, watching the bordering tule patches closely, when I saw one of these grebes sitting. I stopped my machine and immediately the bird became suspicious, but did not move. Undoubtedly she had become used to automobiles passing. There was a small pond in the ditch by the roadside and in this the nest was floating. It was not more than twelve or fifteen feet from me and the black band across the bird's bill was easily noticeable.

My son and I watched her for several minutes, all of us remaining motionless. Then the boy left the car on the farther side without the grebe having seen him. When he came around the end of the auto and she could see him she immediately slipped into the water.

As she half rose preparatory to leaving, I could see her eggs, very clearly and distinctly. But the most interesting thing was to watch her cover them. Her body moved without a pause, yet the bird contrived to take three quick pecks at the sides of her nest, pulling the material in her bill under her body. The time consumed was about twice what a chicken would take to peck three mouthfuls from a feed bin; approximately two seconds, I estimate. In any event there was no perceptible time lost. She seemed to leave the nest as easily and as quickly as any other bird. But when we reached it, not a speck of any part of her six eggs was visible.

Mr. Bent (page 42 of his "Life Histories of North American Diving Birds") states that the young "cling tenaciously to the parent bird while she dives and brings them up again." On June 25, 1919, I saw a Pied-billed Grebe with three young that could hardly have been more than 24 hours old. When I first noticed them the babies were sitting on the mother's back, a very pretty sight. At my approach she dove and left them bobbing on the surface of the water like so many corks. She came up a few yards away and at once they all swam to her and climbed aboard. This process was repeated several times and not once was one of the babies dragged under at all.

I must apologize for my use of the pronoun "she". Of course I had no means of knowing the sex of the parent bird in either of the above cases.—GRIFFING BANCROFT, *San Diego, California, September 12, 1920.*

The Orange-crowned Warbler a Possible Winter Resident at Seattle, Washington.—Although until the past winter, 1919-20, there were only a few spring and fall records for the Orange-crowned Warbler (*Vermivora celata*) on the Puget Sound, it seems now as if the status of this species about Seattle may have to be decidedly changed. It was on December 26 that I secured the first specimen and in the next two months five others were seen, three of which were collected. All were invariably found feeding singly with restless wandering flocks of Kinglets and Chickadees, and being quiet and inconspicuous more were probably overlooked than were actually recorded. The dates on which they were seen were December 26, one bird, January 31, one bird, February 9, one bird, February 13, two birds, and February 27, one bird. Whether this species has merely been overlooked, or whether this winter saw an unusual invasion of these birds, remains for the future to decide. Of the four birds taken, one was sent to the Biological Survey for identification and was returned marked as a separate subspecies of the Orange-crowned Warbler that as yet has not been recognized by the A. O. U., for which reason I have used the specific name. All of them are now in the collection of Mr. D. E. Brown of Seattle.—THOS. D. BURLEIGH, *Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, September 6, 1920.*

Notes on the Calliope Hummingbird.—The writer spent the week from June 18 to 25 at Seven Oaks, in the San Bernardino Mountains, elevation 5200 feet. This proved to be just at the height of the mating season of the Calliope Hummers (*Stellula calliope*), which were feeding abundantly on a species of "paint-brush" that grew rankly in a small hillside cienaga just above the cabins.

While the birds were shy when I moved about openly, they were quite otherwise when I stood or sat quietly beside a clump of willow or an oak-scrub that grew in the locality. From these screens I watched the birds by the hour, at all distances from thirty yards to four feet or less. Dozens of times individuals appeared from nowhere, apparently, and disappeared in like manner, their flight so bullet-like that the eye could hardly follow them. Numerous times I watched females preening on a twig less than six feet distant, but did not see a male thus engaged.

Ordinarily the Black-chins, of which a few haunted the same locality, would drive the Calliopes unmercifully. Once, however, a male Calliope shot close beside me up the hillside, just grazing the grass-tips, driving at a Black-chin that was quietly feeding. Within two feet of the latter he mounted vertically about thirty feet, then dropped like a plummet on the feeding bird, and both flashed down the hill-side with Calliope doing the chasing.

The courting antics of the species likewise received close attention. On one occasion an angry buzzing, almost terrifying in volume, resolved itself into a pair of these birds holding to each other's beaks and revolving like a horizontal pinwheel, *less than four feet from my eyes*. Around they went, a half-dozen times, then parted, the female perching and preening on a twig of the oak-scrub just beyond arm's reach, with the male two feet farther away and giving vent at three-second intervals to an explosive, metallic *tzing*. This was, of course, made with the wings, but the bird was sufficiently screened so that I could not see it clearly.

On another occasion a female sat preening on a horizontal dead weed, when a male shot up the hill-side close to the ground, passed the female, mounted about twenty-five feet and darted down again in a long, narrow, vertical ellipse that flattened where it touched the hill-side. As he passed the female she fluttered and swung head downward on her perch. The male alighted above her, with vibrating wings, and coition took place in this position.

Of seven females taken, one secured on June 19 held a half-developed ovum; two others, taken on this date and two days later, showed slightly developed ova, and the others were still farther from the laying stage. Other females were observed on June 23 and 24 gathering spider-webs about the cabins.—L. E. WYMAN, *Museum of History, Science and Art, Los Angeles, October 2, 1920.*

EDITORIAL NOTES AND NEWS

Honorary membership in the Cooper Ornithological Club has, by action of both Divisions, been conferred upon Florence Merriam Bailey (Mrs. Vernon Bailey). This recognition is based upon Mrs. Bailey's record as an accurate observer of living birds, and upon her marked literary ability in putting into permanent and pleasing form much of high value relative to the life histories of the birds of the western United States. She became an Active member of the Club in 1910 and a Life member in 1919. She has always been a loyal supporter of the purposes of the Club, for instance as evidenced by the numerous articles contributed by her to THE CONDOR.

The present Honorary membership roll of the Cooper Club contains seven names: Robert Ridgway, elected in 1905; Henry W. Henshaw, 1909; C. Hart Merriam, 1909; J. A. Allen, 1910; Frank Stephens, 1912; Edward W. Nelson, 1917; and Florence Merriam Bailey, 1920. Each of these ornithologists has been identified importantly with the development of the ornithology of western North America.

The W. Otto Emerson collection of bird skins, numbering about 5500, has been purchased for the California Academy of Sciences by two public-spirited members of that body, Messrs. John W. Mailliard and W. H. Crocker. This collection consists largely of birds gathered by Mr. Emerson himself during the past forty years in Alameda County, California. Its local value is therefore great, and it is gratifying that its permanent preservation is now assured in a place to which bird students in the San Francisco Bay region can have easy access. A number of rarities are included, such as "record specimens" of species which have been obtained but once or twice on the Pacific Coast or in California. There also goes into the possession of the Academy of Sciences the original manuscript of Cooper's *Ornithology of California* (1870), and that of Cooper's *Birds of Washington Territory* (1860). These had been salvaged from the effects of Dr. Cooper by Mr. Emerson many years ago, shortly after the former's death.

The large reading public reached by the "International Feature Service" through the